
One Erasmus: Very Different Universities

One Erasmus: Very Different Universities

It's the end of the winter semester at Charles University in Prague and whether you're heading home or pitching up for another semester, I'm sure you've all achieved something: a love for Prague, a slight photography and cheap beer obsession, and dumpling-induced weight gain (this includes myself, as I arrived the biggest beer hater walking the Earth and have left a serial chugger). And your university experience? I spent time talking to Erasmus students from institutions across Europe on their learning and social experience at Charles University and more interestingly: how different was it? With the advice, experiences and reflections of my fellow Erasmus comrades, I've compiled 25 fun facts, up-sides, contrasts and big "do's and don'ts" of university life in the Czech Republic!



1 NEVER CALL A CZECH LECTURER BY THEIR FIRST NAME

Many British students including myself have made this mistake when writing emails and verbally addressing their teachers on a friendly basis. Outside of Britain and in the Czech Republic, this is a big no-no and seen as quite disrespectful, unusual and ignorant of student-teacher boundaries. At my home university in England, it's perfectly normal to call your lecturer by using their first name but I was faced with shocked expressions when I told other Erasmus students this. Adapt to new social university customs before you avoid offense!

2 DRINKING AT UNI IS OK

Whilst calling your teacher by their first name is unsocial, having a beer after the end of classes is not, and Czech lecturers have joined many students in their end-of-term celebrations – one even had a shot to celebrate the end of our last presentation class! I think this is different however: whilst Britain and the US are famed for limitless binge drinking at university, the Czech Republic along with other countries such as France and Italy know their limits and generally have a healthier, moderate and social attitude towards alcohol consumption.



3 GET CLUED UP ON THE MARKING SYSTEM

The marking system varies vastly across universities individually, but there tends to be a national norm. In the Czech Republic, you are graded on a 1/2/3/4 basis and sometimes on a pass/fail only. Most students I have spoken to are having a slight nightmare with trying to “translate” these grades for their home universities, so it’s worth asking your lecturer or Erasmus co-ordinator for help and as tempting as it is, don’t leave it until the last minute. On the up-side, enjoy the simplicity and logic of the central European grading system instead of all this 1.2 (or whatever) nonsense.

4AND THE EXAM STRUCTURE

Most Erasmus students were surprised when they had to register and choose the dates for their own exams, as at home many of them are instructed on what date and time their exams are (with no exceptions or excuses for no-shows except death). At Charles University, you have to get off your high horse and do it yourself by registering on the SIS (Student Information System) website. Yes, do it yourself. This does mean however that your exam period is flexible and can suit you by fitting around your travelling and socialising plans. Western Erasmus students told me most of their exams are in written mode and that these and written coursework will compile their final grade. In central European universities, it’s very normal to have oral or/and presentation-style exams as well as written essays and papers. You are also more likely to be examined along the way through mini-tests, class participation and homeworks instead of having a concentrated, stress-inducing exam period once a year. At Charles University all modules and facilities vary regarding marking and exams and some Erasmus students have been left confused by the erratic marking strategies – there is no singular “system” like you’ll find in Western European universities and you’ll find a great deal of marking methods are dependant to the individual lecturer and the subject. At least it makes a change!

5 TEXTING IS ALSO OK

At schools and universities in Western Europe teachers have stricter policies on your happy fingers. Whilst texting and phoning in class in Britain is punishable by detention, extra work and humiliation (being sent out or shouted at in front of a whole lecture hall) the Czech Republic has a more relaxed, trusting attitude. In fact, I don’t really see Czech students

on their mobiles. Some have them on their desk and may send a text during class, but they're not married to their phones and will still pay attention. Most Erasmus students find that it is very relative to the teacher at their home universities, but did notice a more relaxed policy in the Czech Republic. Maybe it's just down to respect that Czech students don't utilise this freedom? Or that the relaxed policy doesn't encourage students to be rebellious for the sake of it.



6 NO MORE DETENTION....YIPEE!

Punishment in Czech universities and schools is definitely not as “authoritarian” as in Britain and the US where it is perfectly normal to be excluded, put in isolation or sentenced to lengthy detentions for not having done your homework, dying your hair pink, swearing or sticking gum on the chair. Erasmus students have found that Charles University encourages independent study and if you don't pay attention or do the work then this is your prerogative...unlike in Britain, you are not having teachers nagging you to hand your work in! Interestingly, I have never seen a teacher tell a student off during my Erasmus stay so far. BUT there are less naughty slackers, which may be down to the fact Erasmus students *chose* to be where they are and have less compulsory modules, so they're not being forced to do anything.

7 ...BUT NO SLACKING, KIDS!

Don't think you're getting off lightly though – classes in the Czech Republic conduct registers far more than in Western Europe. Also, I hate to break it to you, but teachers have eyes.

8 FINDING YOUR LECTURE ROOM IS NO LONGER A SEARCH FOR THE HOLY GRAIL

When I first came to the Faculty of Arts at Charles University, I recoiled in shock. The room numbers are logical. They're chronological. So thank you Charles University from all Erasmus students, for not sending us on a wild goose chase and for relieving many lost foreign students from their embarrassing home university woes of finding room XYZ10 at 8:30 in the morning by having a simple and rare building-floor-number format. I'm sure Erasmus students from campus universities will miss having faculties closer together rather than spread across the city however, but after all that Trdelník or Medovník (popular Czech pastries), we certainly need the exercise.

9 SAY GOODBYE TO THE LATE MONSTER

Most Erasmus students have found that slight lateness is not such an apocalyptic matter here (this again depends on the teacher, so don't push it) and lessons don't always start on the dot. Charles University classes are friendly and teachers are generally very understanding and pleasant, although they take note of and expect contribution from everyone – this means putting your hand up and having your say – both of which require turning up to class. Nonetheless, keep on mind that Czech teachers and students stick to the rule of so called “academic quarter” – you should never be later than 15 minutes for the class – and if the teacher doesn't appear until that point, you might want to investigate if the class was not cancelled for that day.

10 TRAM & METRO JOURNIES WILL MAKE YOU LOSE THE WILL TO LIVE

Crammed metros/ trams during your peaks of tiredness with someone's dog at your feet early in the morning and someone's smelly KFC under your nose late at night, not to mention the race to the escalator, especially when only one is in operation. Still, Prague transport is extremely frequent and far cleaner than the London underground.... make that most underground services, actually. They are also very rarely cancelled due to a protest or strike, both of which are the deepest trials and tribulations of Londoners and Parisians. There are no unexplained cancellations, engineering faults and 45 minute delays. The platform silence which would normally be filled a tannoy voice: "this train is cancelled due to snow/ disruptive passengers/a chicken on the tracks" is also music to my ears.



11 TRAM PRICES & HYGIENE WILL RESTORE THAT WILL

Who the hell wants to get out a mortgage to travel on a smelly, late train filled with hobos and buskers? Nobody in the Czech Republic it seems. Erasmus students all commented on the welcoming fairness of Czech travel prices, so there's no need to be out of pocket to travel to lectures, around the city and its surrounding areas. What's more, there's flexibility. Only travelling for 15 minutes, half an hour or a day? There are tickets for all time frames available, ranging from less than 50 cent to a few Euros. An annual or 3 month pass is pittance too, so there's no excuse to not have a ticket. Remember to validate it though, as the ticket inspectors (as many students have encountered!) can be a little scary and quite a few Erasmus peeps have not read the signs and been landed with a fine. Also note that unlike Western Europe, you can't buy a ticket on the bus, tram or Metro, so this needs to be done prior. It takes some time to get used to, particularly if your home university is rural, but the Czech transport has the Erasmus seal of approval.

12 EVEN ESSAY WRITING IS AN INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Erasmus students all adore the integrated and international environment at Charles University and in the city, enjoying the many languages being spoken down the corridors and in the social areas. Most catering, library and teaching staff are multilingual and very supportive (but as most Erasmus students will agree, a bit of Czech does go a long way!) and we've all been surprised at the ease and fluency of the office and lecturing staff. A number of Erasmus students informed me of their surprise at the choice of language you can submit coursework in too – in one of my modules, I was

given the choice of Czech, Slovak, English, French or German, so it's worth asking your lecturer. Make the most of our multinational university – you won't be able to write your essay in five languages elsewhere!



13 LECTURES PAST YOUR DINNER TIME

For some Erasmus students, class when it's pitch dark outside is madness – many commented that they will never have class before 9 a.m. and after 5 p.m. at home, however the time and duration of lectures doesn't tend to be country-specific but rather relative to the university you attend. At Charles University, many of us have class up until 8 p.m. and as early as 8 a.m. – they also tend to last in between 90 minutes and 2 hours, enough to get some of us inevitably moaning. God help us when we have full time jobs...

14 SMALLER CLASSES FOR THE TEACHER'S PETS

Erasmus students from popular, city and large campus universities are accustomed to impersonal lectures containing hundreds of students and classes with up to 30 or 40. All students I spoke to preferred the smaller, more close-knit classes at Charles University which usually contain as little as 8 or 10 people, meaning that individuals have greater attention from teachers to have their questions answered and learning styles met (plus there's more chance of having a laugh with your teacher = brownie points). And obviously, you can get to know your fellow classmates better and all Erasmus students feel the benefits of this. But please beware that classes in Czech language are as big as we are used to from our home universities – Charles University is after all the biggest Czech university with over 50,000 students. And there are also Erasmus classes for 50 students – particularly by high demanded subjects such as History.

15 YOU MAY END UP A MOVIE STAR

What's the best thing about university in Prague? If it's not the beer or the sights, it's the events scene – the city is a hotspot for action films, horror, historical and mystical settings, so don't be surprised if you see cameras following a James Bond lookalike pelting it down Charles Bridge (this is not a lie – James Bond: Casino Royale has been shot close to Prague, along with many other cinema hits, cosmetic adverts and fashion shows) or trailers carrying hordes of make-up and serving hot soup to freezing models in the city centre. When I asked students what cool things they have seen and done in Prague that they wouldn't do at home, this was the number one response that made me giggle: only Erasmus students would dare to run across the set or stand for ages waving towards the camera range. 5 seconds of fame and I'm sure it was worth it. And yes, you can also register by one of the numerous extras casting agencies which are active in Prague to get a real job in a film.

16 BE A REAL LIFE SIMPSON

Prague sells DUFF BEER. Nowhere else seems to. Life is so much better as a Simpson. That is all.

17 ENJOY THE VARIETY OF ERASMUS TEACHERS

Erasmus students have found teachers to be less strict and more inconsistent across the board with their approaches to teaching and marking than at their home universities, but some have taken this to be just a more diverse teaching style and most have agreed it's just different to what they're used to.

18 SAY AHOJ TO INDIVIDUALISTIC LEARNING AND BETTER GRADES

Charles University has a rich and specialised choice of modules that allow Erasmus students to create a pick and mix program that suits their core interests, passions and strengths. There's flexibility, it's easy to attain a grade that reflects your input and skills more accurately and lecturers have no problem with you sitting in on classes that catch your eye – without taking the exam and adding to your workload.

19 GOD BLESS THE MENZA

Cheap, speedy, yummy and plenty of choice. Charles University has numerous menzas (cafeterias) in the faculties and student accommodation buildings to choose from, so they're convenient and most importantly – they're super cheap, serve decent portion sizes, and there's Wifi. You'll find everyone there – students, guests, lecturers, local residents, workers and you can pay by cash or on your top-up student ISIC/ID card. The menu has regular fixtures but changes daily and you can even check out what's available and pre-order online so it's hot and ready when your tummy starts to rumble. The food is fresh and has that home-cooked comfort – choose from full-blown meals, traditional Czech dinners, hot or cold, salads or snacks and trays of desserts. As a vegetarian, I was warned that I'm going to have hell in the Czech Republic but it's simply not true – there's nutritious salads, pasta or potato dishes, nutty cheesy rolls, fried food and cakes, so you won't go hungry. German, central European and Eastern European universities all have menzas, whilst other Western, Southern and Northern European universities tend to have on-site restaurants and university canteens. From my experience in chain-dominated Britain, you won't find the quantity and range of fresh, handmade meals at university outlets that you see in the Czech menza, and it certainly won't be as affordable.



20 BEER IN THE MENZA

...And to save the best until last: there's an assortment of refrigerated beers at the menza. You won't find booze in most university food outlets in Europe and the US but again, I think this perpetuates the healthy Czech attitude towards alcohol consumption. Some Erasmus students are used to it from their home universities but a lot find it shocking. Still, you'll find everyone from lecturers to janitors enjoying a lunchtime bev. Take advantage! Not only does this hit the Erasmus spot, but it's cheaper than going to the local pub. For the hungover, the non-drinkers and the thirsty, there's water, juices, fizzy drinks and an array of teas and coffees, including cartons of iced!

21 ...BUT NO SPOON FEEDING

Remember to put your cutlery and plates away after you've finished! Most Erasmus students have found that there's a do-it-yourself expectation at Charles University which applies at the menza and to your studies. Some exchange

students see this as being treated rightly like the responsible adults we all are and for some, this requires a level of effort they aren't quite used to at home. Off your bums, everyone!

22 GET USED TO SWEARING AT COMPUTERS

Passwords, slow internet and university websites are still driving you up the wall and for ages you didn't notice the little British flag in the corner of the screen staring at you in the face. And for the majority of Erasmus students who don't speak Czech, these technical catastrophes are even more fist-clenching. Write down that damned passphrase, learn "copy" and "paste" in Czech and pop along to the Charles University ICT team – they speak English and are genuinely empathetic towards your smash-the-monitor state.

23 AND TO SPEAKING SOME LOCAL LINGO

The Erasmus students wish to offer future Charles University students one piece of advice: take that Czech phrasebook out of your bag. It's lonely and it will make your life a great deal simpler. The moody supermarket cashier will be a lot friendlier and you don't want to end up lost in a foreign country and unable to communicate (as a lot of us have done). Set yourself up to the challenge – people will appreciate your efforts, so don't be embarrassed!

24 GET OVER OVEN-LESS LIVING

Some of Charles University accommodation facilities do not have ovens or microwaves in the kitchens (this is particularly the case of Hostivař Hall of Residence) and most of the occupants have noticed this to be a major difference between Czech student living and their home university residences. Větrník and Hvězda, also used to house Erasmus students, do have these facilities and generally bigger kitchens, however. The small kitchens and double-occupancy rooms are very typical of US, Central and Eastern European universities and for some, it took some time getting used to. But we've got over it; we're more self sufficient and we've learnt how to adapt to new environments and countries. We're more inventive with our cooking – I cook curries, soups and fry-ups over the hob – and skint year abroad students will end up surviving on pasta anyway. Moreover, we have more excuses to get out and make the most of the cheap, local cuisines. You'll never feel guilty about McDonalds or dumplings again.



25 BUT HAVE THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE

You'll have a love-hate relationship with the noisy, funny students on your corridor and you've made a bunch of lifelong friends. Nothing could replace Erasmus or the charm and cheapness of Prague, despite the differences.



Poppy Gerrard-Abbott is an Erasmus student studying BA Humanities at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University and her home university is the University of Essex in England. She chose to write for the iForum to build on her journalism skills and meet other aspiring journalists; to grow closer to the social and creative life of Charles University and to learn more about Czech culture and life in Prague through attending local events and researching Czech issues and current affairs.

Poppy saw the iForum as an exciting opportunity to pursue her interests in politics, culture and history whilst meeting other Erasmus students. She thinks it's a very worthwhile and fun experience that has brought some exciting opportunities her way, extended her writing skills and her knowledge of the Czech Republic, and hopes Charles University continues to offer such placements to future students.